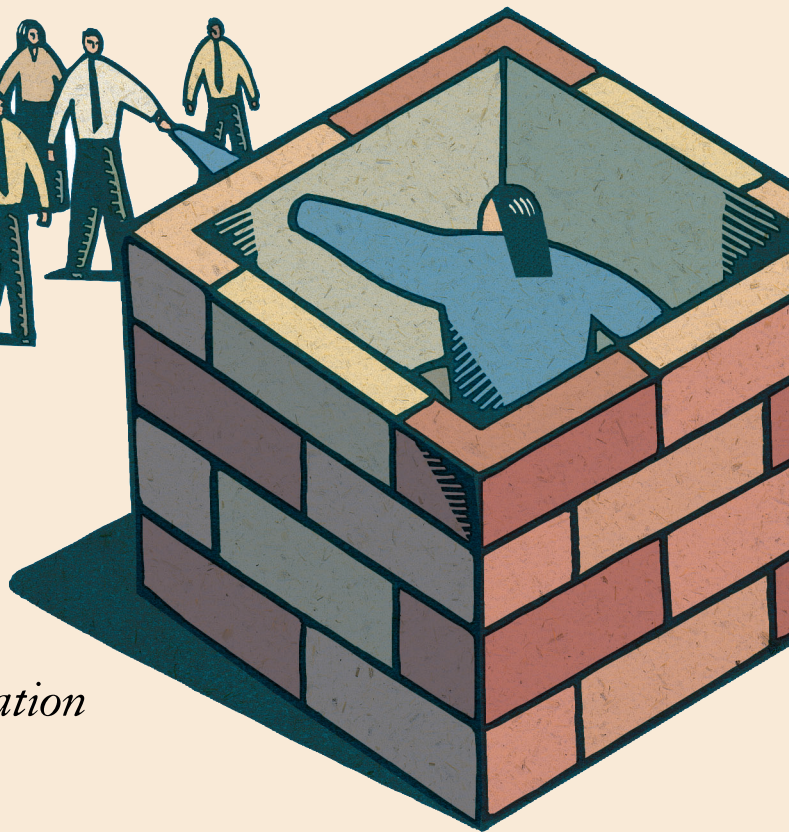


You Are Not Alone

First-year teacher combats isolation



Lucia Falsetti Guarino and Shayne Marie Watterson

Everyone needs a helping hand now and then. During the 2001–2002 academic year, I facilitated an action research group aimed at improving instructional practice among science teachers. The group also turned into a network of support for everyone involved, especially Shayne, a first-year chemistry teacher. During the meetings, Shayne shared her feelings of inadequacy about her minimal, first-year teacher repertoire of instructional methods. She often made statements such as, “I feel like I’m using the same techniques over and over again, and the students are getting tired of the repetition”; “I like to use concept mapping, but I think I use it too frequently”; and “Cooperative learning is great, but I think I’m over-using it.” Shayne repeatedly searched for more ideas, and veteran teachers in the group suggested many resources.

Even though the group responded to Shayne’s requests for additional resources and ideas, she still seemed unsettled. Finally, during one meeting, it became clear that what Shayne was seeking had little to do with the size of her instructional repertoire or cooperative learning—she felt isolated in her career. From that point on, Shayne documented her feelings in a journal. Here we offer some of her journal entries, which directly address the feelings and needs of new teachers and ways to overcome isolation. Even though Shayne, like many new teachers, felt alone and wanted a way to connect with her peers, she maintained a strong sense of personal commitment throughout the first year of her new profession.


Feelings of isolation

Journal entry #1

Now I am all alone. I teach in my room alone, I plan at home alone, I execute plans alone, and I reflect alone. It is a much different world than the one I became accustomed to throughout college, student teaching, and my first semester of teaching. Of course there are people around. I’m not really completely alone, but I don’t have the types of interactions I am used to. Because I am lacking those interactions, I am not being the teacher I could. I have materials from the teacher who preceded me, and I am grateful that she has shared so much, but it is not mine. I occasionally find a worksheet, lab, or demonstration of hers that meets my daily needs, but I do not have the support I need to make complete coherent units that work for me, reflect on the success of those units, and select aspects to focus on or alter for next time.

In addition to being thrust into a position where I feel isolated, there is also a tremendous amount of pressure to be successful. I want to be the best teacher I can be, and I work very hard to create a good environment for students. However, I only have so many ideas and can only do so much alone. I have read articles and searched the Internet for innovative ideas, but these methods are time consuming. The gain almost never makes up for the lost time (the most precious resource in my life right now).

I want access to better approaches to creating a good classroom. I yearn to try new techniques and strategies. I want someone to help me in the way my cooperating teacher, fellow student teachers, and science coordinator did. I really want a person to talk to, reflect with, and bounce ideas off of. I don’t



want to be a nuisance; I want the communication and sharing to be mutual and beneficial to both parties. It is shocking to be so isolated; the lack of collaborative planning and reflection is thwarting my ability to reach my maximum potential.

The feelings that Shayne expresses are not unusual for new teachers. For those who experience it, however, isolation can be very difficult. Isolation, both physical and social, is not new to teaching (Lortie, 1975). The structure of the school building itself isolates teachers from one another (Harris, 1995). This, coupled with the invisible walls constructed by the culture of teaching, creates a setting that promotes privacy and isolation (Britzman, 1986). Additionally, there are tacit rules about what is suitable to talk about in the workplace. It is acceptable to talk about the weather and sports and to complain about the students or school itself, but it is unacceptable to talk about the craft of teaching (Lieberman and Miller, 1984). Given the above conditions, it is no wonder that new teachers feel isolated and uncomfortable sharing their questions and concerns regarding their classrooms in fear of revealing their self-perceived inadequacies (Rogers and Babinski, 1999).

The value of good conversation

What is it that makes conversation worthwhile? That's the question author Roland Barth asked hundreds of people. Respondents answered that good conversation entails taking the time to talk together, allowing time to reflect on what is important, and listening without being judgmental. Worthwhile conversation, they said, strengthens relationships and mutual commitment (Barth, 2001).

As a new teacher with limited time and a sense of isolation, Shayne made the intuitive decision to join our action research group and became part of a powerful conversation.

Journal entry #2

In efforts to be part of a learning community, I have extended myself to many professional development opportunities. I am currently participating in a workshop with four other science teachers in my district. We have all found a focus within our classrooms that inspires us to do research and modify our strategies. This group is a tremendous support network. We meet every three to four weeks, discuss the focus issues, and support each other in a professional way. It is through the work of this group that I have gained the inspiration to share my ideas.

Shayne was proactive in searching for the conversations she needed to rescue her from isolation. Her success derives from the confidence she has in herself.

Taking responsibility

As a professor in an initial math and science certification program, I frequently hear students comment on external barriers that can block their own teaching. Why do these students focus on barriers when there is so much to learn about success? Even as a new science teacher many years

ago, I did not consider those barriers, because I believed I had the power to influence student learning. Shayne offers sage advice to new teachers and, in doing so, shows that she, too, believes in taking responsibility for success.

Journal entry #3

A new teacher must take responsibility for what is going on in the classroom. It is easy to get swept up by others who say, "It's not your fault—if this school had a strong mentoring program, if you had your own classroom, if you had computers in your room, and if you only had one prep you would be a success." Many of these arguments seem to make sense and it is always easier to blame others than to take responsibility. New teachers must be empowered and responsible for their classroom, for the good and the bad. They must make things happen—seek out other teachers who are inspiring, attend workshops, and participate in professional development. The more positive interactions a new science educator has with colleagues, the more empowered that teacher becomes. A teacher shouldn't be unsuccessful because of what others have not done; they should be successful because of what they have done.

Keep the door open

From time to time I hear teachers say that one of the great things about teaching is being able to go into a room, shut the door, and do anything! While this may be true to some extent, we urge new teachers to keep their doors open. Autonomy does not grow out of isolation. Finding the right conversations and becoming part of them will serve science teachers well in the years to come. We hope that by sharing Shayne's proactive approach to overcoming her isolation, other new teachers will feel empowered to do the same. ~

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